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ABSTRACT

High schools have responded to the poor labor market primarily by encouraging college-for-all policies, leading the majority of seniors to plan to get college degrees, even those who perform poorly. School policies focus too narrowly on academic achievement, overlooking soft skills like motivation, dependability, attention to quality, and social interaction. Educational policies also fail to give students a clear understanding of incentives for mastery of both academic and soft skills. Other nations like Germany and Japan provide clearer incentives for achievement that Americans could use as policy models. Labor market entry policies can be improved by making achievement relevant to goals. Improved student contacts with colleges and employers can clarify incentives for achievement. These two reforms are promising: (1) tech prep programs that teach students about college and occupational demands and allow a seamless college transition, and (2) youth apprenticeship and cooperative learning programs that give work experiences students need to improve chances for labor market success. Policies to improve graduates' readiness for college or employment are the following: colleges involved in tech prep could adopt standardized tests of college readiness; high schools could provide employers with better signals of soft skills; and high schools could build more trustworthy employer relationships. (YLB)

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LSS Spotlight on Student Success

A digest of research from the Laboratory for Student Success No. 605

High Schools' Role in College and Workforce Preparation: Do College-for-All Policies Make High School Irrelevant?

by

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The struggles of youth without college degrees constitute a labor-market crisis as they move from one dead-end job to another, unable to develop skills, status, and earnings. Employers complain that these employees lack basic skills, which must be provided on the job. Growing shortages of skilled workers suggest that educational reform must address improving the abilities and opportunities of high-school graduates. This article shows that schools have misunderstood work-entry problems by focusing on college entry and that students have misunderstood incentives for achievement. Moreover, many other nations communicate incentives effectively, and American schools could improve incentives and job entry.

Schools View Students' Problems Too Narrowly

High schools have responded to the poor labor market primarily by encouraging college-for-all policies, leading the majority of seniors to plan college degrees, even those who perform poorly. However, their expectations will be largely disappointed, since only 37.6% of those planning a degree receive one in the 10 years following graduation; and of those graduates with high-school Cs or lower planning bachelor's degrees, only 16.1% attain the degree after 10 years. Despite good intentions, high-school counselors underinform students about the effort required to graduate college, encouraging unrealistic expectations without exploring well-paid careers in trades that would be more realistic options for many.

Furthermore, school policies focus too narrowly on academic achievement, overlooking soft skills like motivation, dependability, attention to quality, and social interaction, which many employers value above academic skills. Even such a basic skill as effort remains unexercised, since students believe that academic effort bears little relation to their futures. Moreover, behaviors like absenteeism, insubordination, and incomplete work are tolerated in high schools, while employers value the opposite behaviors in young workers.

Students Need Clearer Incentives

Educational policies also fail to give students a clear understanding of incentives for mastery of both academic and soft skills. Teachers are exhorted to increase students' motivation, but the rewards for such efforts remain obscure. Institutions need mechanisms for communicating the value of students' actions for college and career goals. Instead, schools often indicate that school behavior is irrelevant to immediate goals, since colleges' open-admissions policies allow even weak students to enroll. Further, employers ignore high-school performance records in hiring, partly because they do not consider them trustworthy or cannot obtain them. Instead of using high-school performance in hiring decisions, they limit graduates to entry-level work until they prove themselves. As a result, students cannot tell if or how their goals are attainable.

Incentives in Other Nations

Many other nations provide clearer incentives for achievement that Americans could use as policy models. Foreign educational systems clearly link school performance and career outcomes. In Germany, for example, work-bound students strive for apprenticeships that lead to respected occupations, knowing that secondary-school grades affect selection for those opportunities. Afterwards, apprentice certification gives German youth a sense of accomplishment rare for U.S. youth. Unlike our unemployed graduates, unemployed German apprentices feel unlucky, not incompetent. Similarly, in Japan, high-school grades are linked to entry into respected occupations for the work-bound. If their achievement is too low for their goals, Japanese students know it in advance and can increase effort or lower expectations.

Improving Labor-Market Entry Policies

Making Achievement Relevant to Goals

Schools in the United States already have a system, College Board Testing, linking academic achievement to goals on the foreign model, but it only extends to the minority of students aspiring to selective colleges. Test results inform

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high-achieving students well before graduation of the likelihood of admission and of the need for increased effort. Low-achieving students, who typically aspire only to less selective institutions, lack such incentives, which apprenticeships or more rigorous college admissions standards could provide. The perceived gap between high-school performance and job success could also be bridged by educating students about research showing that better high-school grades and soft skills predict better earnings. For example, a rise of one letter grade (from C to B) is associated with a 12% earnings gain 9 years after high school.

Further, high schools could link job-finding aid to achievement and inform students about research that indicates that job entry through a school contact increases nine-year earnings potential by 17%. Counselors and other educators should stop keeping students in the dark about the consequences of their performance, even if they withhold information only to be kind to students or to placate parents.

Improving College and Employer Contacts

Improved student contacts with colleges and employers can clarify incentives for achievement. Two reforms have been promising, despite difficulties aligning these high-school experiences with later demands. First, tech-prep programs articulate junior and senior year curriculum with community-college technology programs, teaching students about college and occupational demands and making for a seamless college transition. Tech-prep success indicates that a student is prepared for college, and failure motivates efforts to improve and to adjust goals. Unfortunately, existing tech-prep programs often have below-standard requirements, leaving students ignorant of college-level demands and relegated to remedial classes in college. Further reform should focus on integrating those demands into the preparatory curriculum.

Second, youth apprenticeship and cooperative learning (co-op) programs give some students the work experiences they need to improve their chances for success in the labor market. Apprenticeships coordinate school and workplace learning under close supervision. However, they are so expensive that few U.S. employers are willing to pay for them. In co-ops, sometimes seen as inexpensive apprenticeships, students are released from some classes to work in positions that ideally provide more training than average youth jobs. In practice, however, too many co-ops *are* average youth jobs with little training and few postgraduation opportunities. While apprenticeships increase a student's earning potential, co-ops often do not, unless students are able to secure jobs at the same company that provides their co-op experience. These potentially useful programs could be improved through expansion, increased quality, better training, and improved communication of a given student's job readiness.

Improving Signals of Student Value

Unlike Germany's and Japan's, our high schools do not clearly convey graduates' readiness for college or employment. Several policies could begin to solve that problem. First, colleges involved in tech-prep could adopt standardized tests of college readiness. Well before graduation, these tests could indicate academic quality clearly to students themselves, allowing time for backup plans. Second, high schools could provide employers with better signals of soft skills. Indeed, by reflecting attendance, discipline, and motivation, grades already do this to some extent, and further signals of student qualities could be developed. Some high schools have already created employability ratings tailored to employers' needs, and these schools have reported increased student motivation. Further research on the effects of such ratings is needed. Third, high schools could build more trustworthy employer relationships, for instance through vocational teachers, so that the best qualified students could more easily be hired. Employers indicate that such relationships aid hiring and give them dependable information. However, connections between schools and employers are still rare; only 8% of seniors get jobs through school contacts, despite the clear advantages. Hiring through contacts may limit the applicant pool, but large applicant pools do not help employers if they cannot assess applicants' quality. Hiring selectively is preferable to hiring randomly. Teachers can build relationships through trade experience, careful applicant screening, and candor.

Employers and teachers should establish reciprocity so that both parties value the relationship for meeting mutual needs and not for extrinsic benefits, such as teachers pleasing administrators by placing weak students or businesses improving public relations by extensive co-op hiring. When extrinsic benefits are central, teacher–employer relationships have little reason to develop. In such cases, sacrifices for reciprocity's sake, like better student screening despite administrators' demands and more intensive yet less visible apprenticeships, could establish the trust needed to foster the relationship.

Conclusion

Regrettably, current policies work against improved school–employer contacts, since vocational programs and their well-connected teachers are being curtailed in favor of college-for-all policies. To reverse this trend, vocational education should expand in high schools and community colleges. Teachers with good trade contacts should be retained and rewarded for making good placements in industry. Teachers and counselors should also be encouraged to give employers candid information about students and to be forthright with students about their abilities and opportunities. These policies could encourage employers to see high schools as valuable sources of hiring information.

Other steps could include acquainting counselors with noncollege options and evaluating students' college and career abilities more accurately and consistently. The underlying conditions for such policies are present; the key is making the institutional actors aware of the importance of improving students' opportunities for job-entry success.

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